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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate (1) the relationship between mothers' and fathers' attitudes about education at the time of their children's kindergarten entry, and (2) the relationship between these parent attitudes and children's kindergarten adjustment. Subjects were drawn from the kindergarten rosters of four suburban elementary schools in a metropolitan area of Ohio. Questionnaires were sent to all-white English-speaking two-parent families who had nonhandicapped children entering kindergarten for the first time. A total of 129 mothers and 119 fathers responded. Instruments used were the Parent Attitude Toward Education Scale and the First Grade Adjustment Scale. Results indicated that, as their children begin school, parents value education and are confident that the schools will do a good job of educating. The positive relationship between mothers' and fathers' attitudes about education thus suggested that families react to events as a system. However, only mothers' attitudes were related to children's school adjustment. Specifically, maternal attitudes were significantly related to children's scores on the Physical Status and Motor Behavior and the Intellectual Abilities and Behavior subscales of the First Grade Adjustment Scale. No significant relationships were found between fathers' attitudes and children's adjustment scores. (RH)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTAL ATTITUDES ABOUT EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S EARLY ADJUSTMENT TO KINDERGARTEN

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTAL ATTITUDES ABOUT EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S EARLY ADJUSTMENT TO KINDERGARTEN

For many families the first contact with formal education occurs when their children enter kindergarten. Although this event is an expected and predictable part of family life, the entry of a child into school may cause considerable stress in parents. It is important for educators to recognize parents' feelings at the time of their children's school entry so that they may better understand the impact of schooling on the child and the family and support the child's transition from home to school.

With their entry into the educational system, children become deeply involved in relationships outside the family network. Some parents may be uncomfortable with their children's new relationships. They are reluctant to give up parental protectiveness and control to strangers. Some parents may feel competitive with school personnel for the affection and respect of their children. These parental concerns are further complicated by the fact that many parents who are reluctant to relinquish control of their children to the school also realize that independence in school and other out of home contexts is crucial to their children's development and success in adulthood. These conflicting feelings in parents may contribute to stress in the family and influence children's adjustment to the school setting (Lightfoot, 1978; Rapoport, Rapoport, Strelitz & Kew, 1977).

Another aspect of school entry which may contribute to stress in families is change in the school age child's role in the family. By assuming the student role and its concomitant responsibilities, children must relinquish some of their responsibilities at home. Consequently parental roles within the family change (Hill & Rodgers, 1964). Pressures from the school may also force parents to re-examine their roles. During the early years of children's lives, parents were the primary socializing force. As their children enter school, parents must share this role with teachers and children's peers. Parents may feel that the school is stripping them of their traditional functions. They must learn to incorporate the influences of other people in their children's lives into their roles as parents (Rapoport, Rapoport, Strelitz & Kew, 1977).

The entry of a child into formal schooling is an event common to almost all families with children, yet surprisingly little research exists which examines the impact of a child's school entry on the family. Klein and Ross (1958) explored parent concerns during their children's first five weeks of kindergarten. Through group interviews of 45 mothers and nine fathers, parents expressed concerns about separating from their children, value conflicts between the home and school, and role changes. They also found that parental tension proceeded through a sequence of four pahses: anticipation, relief, role definition, and equilibrium. Parents also described changes in children's behavior after they began school. The researchers concluded that if these reactions to school entry were not adequately resolved within the family, children's

school adjustments and home/school collaboration could be hampered. Because this was primarily a descriptive study, no attempt was made to determine relationships between parents' concerns and aspects of children's behavior.

More recently, Hock, McKenry, Hock, Triolo and Stewart (1980) examined parents' reactions to their children's school entry. Through telephone interviews, 40 pairs of fathers and mothers were questioned about their feelings. Over 50% of the parents reported some anxiety about their children's school entry. Mothers' and fathers' reactions were positively related. Fathers' reports of sadness were nagatively related to their confidence in the good quality of the school experience for their children. Fathers' confidence in school quality was also related to their closeness to their children. It seems that parents' attitudes about education at the time of school entry may contribute to family stress.

The studies just discussed indicate that a child's entry into schooling is a difficult time for parents. There seems to be a relationship between parental anxiety and beliefs about education. In fact, higher levels of anxiety have been associated with parents' lack of confidence in the quality of the school experience for the child. The beginning of the kindergarten year may be a time in which parents are consciously evaluating the role of education in their children's lives. Parents' beliefs about education may be related to the level of stress within the family and children's adjustment to the school setting. It is the purpose of this study to

investigate 1) the relationship between mothers' and fathers' attitudes about education at the time of their children's kindergarten entry and 2) the relationship between these parent attitudes and children's adjustment to kindergarten.

Method

Subjects. Subjects were drawn from the kindergarten rosters of four suburban elementary schools in a large metropolitan area in Ohio. All (229) white, English speaking, two parent families whose nonhandicapped child was entering kindergarten for the first time received a questionnaire. From this population 129 (57%) mothers and 119 (52%) fathers responded. Respondents were middle-class to upper middle-class (Duncan Socio-Economic Index mean score of 61.57).

Instruments. Two instruments were used in this study. The Parent Attitude Toward Education Scale (Medinnus, 1962) was used to assess parents' attitudes about the importance of education and their confidence in the quality of the schools. This is a 40 item, four point, interval scale. The Spearman-Brown split -half reliability was .76 for mothers and .79 for fathers.

The First Grade Adjustment Scale (Medinnus, 1961) was used by all classroom teachers in this study to rate their students' adjustment to kindergarten. This scale was developed to assess children's adjustment to their first elementary school experience. It is a 52 item, five point, rating scale. The items are grouped

into five subscales: Physical Status and Motor Behavior, Social Behavior, Emotional Behavior, Intellectual Abilities and Behavior, and Adjustment to Classroom Membership and Requirements.

Procedures. On the Friday prior to the first day of school, each parent received The Parent Attitude Toward Education Scale in the mail. Written instructions directed parents to complete the questionnaire prior to the first day of school and to refrain from discussing their responses with their spouses. Surveys were returned to the researcher through the mail.

During the first week of school the researcher met with the kindergarten teachers in each school. In these orienting meetings the purpose of the study was described and instruction on the use of The First Grade Adjustment Scale was given. Classroom teachers rated the adjustment of every child in each of their classroom groups on the weekend following the sixth week of school.

Results

The Parent Attitude Toward Education Scale was scored by tallying the item responses. Negative item scores were reversed so a high score indicated positive attitudes toward education. The range of possible scores for this instrument was 40 - 160, The mean scores were 125.62 (SD = 11.15) for mothers and 123.04 (SD = 10.64) for fathers.

The First Grade Adjustment Scale was scored by adding the individual item scores within each subscale and the total scale. This resulted in five subscale scores and a total adjustment score.

There is a possible range of 52 - 260 for the total scale score. The mean score was 203.46 (SD = 50.49) after six weeks of school.

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analyses were used to measure the relationships between mothers' and fathers' attitudes about education and between mothers' and fathers' scores and children's subscale and total adjustment scores. There was a significant positive relationship ($r = .32$, $p < .001$) between mothers' and fathers' attitudes about education. Mothers' attitudes were significantly related to children's scores on the Physical Status and Motor Behavior ($r = .25$, $p = .002$) and the Intellectual Abilities and Behavior ($r = .23$, $p = .005$) subscales of The First Grade Adjustment Scale. There were no significant relationships between fahters' attitudes and children's adjustment scores.

Discussion

The mean scores on the Parent Attitude Toward Education Scale indicate that as their children begin school parents value education and are confident that the schools wil do a good job of educating their children. This finding supports Lightfoot's argument that parents consider education important to their children's future success. If these families are experiencing stress during their children's school entry, it does not seem to be lowering parents' opinions of education. One might speculate that parent responses may reflect their hopes that school will successfully meet their children's needs rather than their satisfaction with the state of education within their communities.

The positive relationship between mothers' and fathers' attitudes about education suggests that families do react to events as a system. Change in one member's status influences other members, and one parent's attitudes influence the other's. However, from this study it is impossible to determine the direction of influence. The fact that only mothers' attitudes related to children's adjustment may indicate that their reactions may be more influential where children and education are concerned. This may also be related to the structure and role relationships within the family.

It is interesting to note that mothers' attitudes did not relate to all aspects of school adjustment but only to two specific areas - physical and intellectual abilities. It may be that mothers who are concerned about their children's education actively prepare children for school by providing them with experiences which would promote these abilities. However, it may also be that mothers of children who seem physically and intellectually ready for school have more confidence in their children's abilities to be successful and therefore, have more positive attitudes about education.

These data indicate that school entry is a time when both mothers and fathers have positive attitudes toward education. Mothers' positive attitudes seem to influence children's physical and intellectual adjustment to kindergarten. School personnel need to be aware that the early part of the school year is a period of positive interest in the school for parents. It seems that this period would be a particularly fruitful time for teachers and principals to initiate contact with families.

Positive contact with families early in the year could foster these positive attitudes and support children and families during their transition from home to school.

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